Review of Yuri Pines: The Everlasting Empire: Traditional Chinese Political Culture and Its Enduring, Legacy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012

Yuri Pines. *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.

Over the last decades sources on Chinese history have become more widely and easily accessible and our knowledge on China has increased a hundredfold. At the same time, postmodern thinkers have deconstructed the notion of truth as a value in the West. New perspectives on truth as a will to power in discourses, as an endless play of signifiers or as a choice of literary tropes, have had a deep impact on history writing. As a consequence, academic attempts to draw general lines in their depictions of China to catch a glimpse of her true and distinct character have been replaced either by specialist studies on highly focused topoi and chronologically limited timeframes or by comprehensive magna opera that summarize existing research. Responding to a public demand to explain the complex phenomenon of a rapidly changing China as a rising superpower in plain and conclusive terms, greater synthetic hypotheses about China's nature, typical characteristics or epoch-spanning features have in the last twenty years therefore been mainly produced in a broad variety of non-academic media. This split between an impenetrable academic literature on China and an open market of popular media that offers cheap products of various explanations to—even amongst the intelligentsia—appallingly uninformed readers has barely been bridged from the sinological side.

Yuri Pines' book, though mainly addressed to an academic readership is the first serious attempt for a long time to venture a grand synthetic yet academic outline of China's history that defines a number of continuous principles which for more than 2000 years have secured the stability, identity and durability of the Chinese empire and even continue to persist today.

This daring attempt is astonishingly convincing. This is due not only to Pines' exceptional broad knowledge of Chinese history but most notably to a number of clever methodological decisions which the author has made for reasons that will be discussed later in this review.

First, thematically, the book does not deal with China per se. Pines is all too aware of the potential pitfall of broad and superficial generalizations and of "reductionist, essentialized, or ahistorical perceptions of Chinese culture" (p. 5). He therefore concentrates his analysis on a limited aspect, namely the well known phenomenon of the longevity of the Chinese (as the title suggests: everlasting) empire. By posing this question Pines pursues three goals, a) he wants to "outline the essentials of China's political culture", discern "long standing patterns

and modes of functioning" peculiar to China by "outlining fundamental principles of the empire's functioning" (p. 7). He further wants b) to "locate the Chinese example more firmly within the […] field of 'imperiology'" (p. 7) and to c) "reassess the role of the imperial experience in the modern history of China" (p. 8).

The focus on this topic is well chosen to discuss particularities of the Chinese empire vis à vis other empires. The Maurya Empire of Ashoka stimulated Chinese imperial phantasies by far more than Indian imaginations of a perfect state, other empires of the ancient world did not survive into the 20th century. The obsession with and continuity of imperial unity is indeed a feature of Chinese political culture which distinguishes it from others and a worthwhile starting point of cultural comparison. Yet, during the last 1700 years of the empire, from the end of the Han dynasty (220 CE) until the end of the Qing (1912 CE) China was not unified for 750 years. The ideological urge for unification could therefore not have been too pressing and should possibly rather be regarded as one of the many tools from the cultural repertoire which was used for purposes of legitimation in situations when one of the many states that after the breakdown of a previous great state constantly strived for supremacy (like it was the case in India and other empires) eventually established yet another powerful state by uniting smaller states. The Gupta or Mughal Empires did so pretty much like the Tang, Song or Yuan without, however, referring back to a pan-India ideology or to historical precedents.

Second, Pines does not attempt to give an account of China's history by demonstrating how stable and unified China was politically, economically, institutionally or culturally. He focuses instead on the analysis of intellectual concepts and discourses. His book is thus not primarily an analysis of historical events but rather an analysis of ideological discourses and their practical adaptions in different historical contexts. The Chinese empire is first and foremost regarded as an ideological construct which shaped the imperial polity and secured the empire's resurrection in more or less the same shape after periods of turmoil. The endurance of the Chinese empire is mainly explained by the striking strength and continuity of these ideological discourses.

This is a surprisingly unmaterialistic approach for an author who in so many other respects is deeply committed to Marxist analyses and one wonders whether, given that these discourses were obviously so much more stable in China than in other empires external conditions may not also have played a decisive role in supporting these ideologies.

Third, the book does in fact not cover China's entire history but only very small parts of it. Yuri Pines is an internationally renowned expert on the Chunqiu and Warring States

periods. Last year, responding to a talk of mine, he jokingly remarked how fascinating he finds it how individual scholars always reconstruct China entirely on the basis of their own fields of research. This also applies to this book (as he would concede). One of the basic hypotheses of the book is that a number of premises which emerged as points of consensus during the Warring States period such as the premises of unity and monarchism "became the ideological foundation of the future empire, and they were not questioned for millennia to come." Yet these "preimperial thinkers bequeathed to the empire builders not a ready model, but rather a set of basic principles and a variety of conflicting policy recommendations […] fluid enough to allow constant readjustment of manifold policies" (p. 4). Although Pines does not regard Chinese political culture in unilinear terms but rather as full of paradoxes and tensions (p. 5) he assumes that its ideological guidelines and framework according to which all later political culture operated were created in pre-imperial times and provided the basis for the empire's stability. This determines Pines' approach to Chinese imperial culture which he interprets as an application, adoption and illustration of these pre-imperial ideologies. The book is structured accordingly. Five chapters are arranged topologically, according to five basic principles which Pines identifies as the central ideological concepts which carried the imperial state: a) political unity, b) monarchism, c) behavioral norms for politically involved intellectuals/literati, d) rules for dealing with local elites and e) commoners (p. 5). These principles have not been designed for this book on a drawing-board but are the result and summary of Pines' year long research. The book has been growing over the last twenty years becoming visible first with Pines' lengthy article on "The Search for Stability" (1997), followed by articles on "'The Great Unity' Paradigm" (2000), "Ruler-Minister Relations" (2002) and the publication of the PhD thesis in 2002 on *Foundations of Confucian Thought*. Further articles followed on "'The Great Unity' Paradigm in Chinese Political Culture" (2004), "Zhanguo Egalitarianism and the Sovereign's Power" (2005), "Imagining the Empire? Concepts of 'Primeval Unity' in Pre-imperial Historiographic Tradition" (2008), "Legitimacy of Rebellion in Chinese Political Tradition" (2008), and, most importantly, his monograph *Envisioning Eternal Empire: Chinese Political Thought of the Warring States Era* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009) in which Pines develops three of the five principles (the ruler, the intellectual, the people) in great detail for the Warring States period. The present book builds on all this work. Like the last book it is dedicated to Pines' teacher Liu Zehua who has deeply inspired his work through his own research on the history of Chinese political thought, his studies on monarchism as central product of China's intellectual culture, on ruler-minister relationships, the historical role of Chinese intellectuals, the concept of the people in

Chinese history and people's resistance. Pines research builds on Liu's work, and it provides the basis for the first parts of the five principle-chapters. In the second part of the chapters he goes beyond his earlier research and explores "how the ideological principles laid down in the preimperial or early imperial period were implemented and modified in the proves of their actualization." No systematic history is presented here, instead historical cases, chosen from all major dynasties and roughly arranged in chronological order, serve as "historical illustrations of the complex pattern of transformation and evolution of ideas and practices throughout the imperial millenia" (p. 5).

This third point appears weaker than the previous two. Firstly, the five principles are not specific enough to explain operations particular to the Chinese empire. A comparative perspective would have been helpful to explain that and why the same principles were not in operation in other empires as well and how they mark China as distinct from these. Secondly, the selection of historical illustrative cases does not prove the consistency of the principles throughout Chinese history. The reader wonders how broad the empirical basis for the five principles actually is across Chinese history as a whole. Given the abundance of Chinese historical sources a broad range of principles could certainly be illustrated by selected historical case studies. This however would not prove their analytical value to explain general questions such as the durability of the Chinese empire. In other words, that the author is able to present cases from Chinese history which illustrate his principles is not very surprising and therefore not very convincing as an argument for the central role which Pines ascribes to them for all times and at all places of Chinese history. Third, another basic principle in Chinese political history is that political strategies of legitimation always drew on historical precedents and models of the (golden) past. The fact that later Chinese empires were built on the ideological foundations of Early China is probably due to this basic principle of turning backwards for orientation. If we thus conceptualize China's past as a cultural tool-kit, repertoire or archive then any imperial state building would constantly, also in times of disunity, make use of a great range of aspects of China's past (of which the five principles are only a small part) which provided a pool of received politico-ethical norms that legitimized political action. Despite all this critique, this third point still provides a highly valuable analytical framework which is precise enough to be discussed, to be applied in comparative analyses, and to be further differentiated and modified by later historical research.

Like the imperial cases, chapter six is also new in that it discusses continuity and abandonment of imperial patterns in China's modern age providing fresh and interesting interpretations of modern Chinese politics in the analytical terms of the established imperial

ideology. This chapter mirrors the fivefold structure of the first five chapters in analyzing whether and how each of the five basic principles of the imperial model were abandoned, modified or retained after 1912, in other words, whether modern China is just another modified variant of the imperial model or has to be understood as a radical new political system. The chapter provides some of the most original analytical insights, Pines' comparison of the role of the CCCP with the literati of the past is particularly intriguing.

Pines avoids the application of Western politological theories or analytical terminology in his analyses much of which could have possibly sharpened or deepened his analysis (for the analysis of the monarch, for example, Ernst Kantorowicz' *dignitas*, *The King's Two Bodies*, Max Weber's *charisma*, Carl Schmitt's definition of the Sovereign, Giorgio Agamben's *authority*/*auctoritas* vs *power*/*potestas*, Theodor Mommsen's *living law* vs *written law* etc). There is also no comparative recourse to concepts from Roman political theory (*auctoritas*, *potestas*, *imperium*, *dignitas*, *gravitas*) which might have proven helpful. He also does not develop his own analytical terms but mainly tries to make use of Chinese concepts and terms in his analyses such as interior-exterior (*nei wai*, p. 36), unity (*tong*), monarch (*wang*, *zhu*), intellectuals (*shi*), people (*min*) etc., even referring to the concept of a *yinyang* structure of Chinese history developed by his teacher Liu Zehua (p. 5.). Pines seems to be reluctant to use the Chinese case to contribute to Occidental hegemonic discourses and prefers to have Chinese sources speaking as much as possible in their own voice to give expression to their own distinct experiences. In a review on Li Feng's *Bureacracy and the State in Early China: Governing the Western Zhou* Pines criticizes him for using Max Weber in his analysis of Western Zhou bureaucracy instead of explaining it through a direct comparison with the Chunqiu context. In the introduction to his 2009 book he is also quite explicit about this approach: "Instead of judging the political ideas of ancient Chinese thinkers from a modern perspective—be it in terms of class struggle, human rights patriotism, gender, equality, or democracy—we should try to understand them in their own, immediate context" (p. 8). This is the principle he is also following in this book (however it might work).

This is a very personal book in many respects. Not only is it the summa of Pines' own most erudite research it also accomplishes his own research agenda and vision of an eternal empire. The book with its slight didactic tone thus also conveys a message that goes beyond China and tries to contribute not only to the academic field of "imperiology" but also to quite practical considerations of policy making. The book is a book on rulers, ministers, intellectuals and the people, but also a book on unity and diversity, of how to deal with diversity in unity. It is a book on China but also on Russia and on Israel, on the regulation of

power in hegemonic constructions, on oppression and rebellion. The book reflects a personal engagement and experience in the day-to-day business of politics which provide the author with an empathic approach to the inner governmental logic of Chinese political ideology that gives his analysis a tinge of authority that is not solely based on mere historical knowledge. Political stability and unity, capable and efficient rulership, the role of intellectuals and the people are still topics that are relevant today. Pursuing these questions Pines has found a like-minded teacher in Li Zehua whose research like that of so many other Chinese scholars is intrinsically related to contemporary politics. This becomes obvious for example in Liu's work on the role of Warring States intellectuals and the people published during the 1980s. Throughout Pines' book there is a tone of respect towards the stability that was achieved in the Chinese empire by means of the five principles and a clear reference to the own contemporary situation when Pines (who lives in Jerusalem and Beijing) writes at the end of his introduction: "While we remain deeply enmeshed in our own hegemonic discourse—that of democracy, equality, and human rights—it may still be refreshing to weigh advantages and disadvantages of alternative political formations and alternative hegemonic ideologies, of which the Chinese empire presents one of the most interesting examples. Without either embellishing or disparaging it, we may reflect upon its strengths and weaknesses and reassess its value, not only for a better understanding of the history of political ideas and political formation, but also for coping with the ever-changing political challenges of our own time" (pp. 9-10).

This ambitious book is amazingly rich and full of original and provocative hypotheses which are based on Pines meticulous analysis of primary sources. It attempts to explain what Pines understands to be the major features of Chinese political culture of the last two millennia and is a deeply instructive and highly inspiring read for academics and non-academics alike. We are lucky to have a China historian who has the courage again to formulate general hypotheses on China in a book which has the potential to encourage discussions amongst intellectual historians within and outside of the China field. These discussions might even challenge colleagues to try revealing their own hidden general assumptions about Chinese culture in an equally informed and intellectually stimulating way.